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SUBJECT: SHANGHAI'S GAY COMMUNITY

¶1. (U) Summary: In a series of meetings with Poloff in April 2007, gay individuals in Shanghai said their identity and lifestyle continued to be shaped by family and social pressures to conform, which had different impacts on male and female homosexuals. Maintaining a gay identity tended to be less at the forefront for Chinese gays and lesbians than maintaining family harmony and "face." General public attitudes towards homosexuality were not hostile but instead shaped by a greater social ideal of the traditional family. This is the first of four cables updating the social, medical, media and legal trends in the gay community in Shanghai. End Summary.

SHANGHAI: CHINA'S EMERGING SAN FRANCISCO  
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¶2. (SBU) Shanghai is a cosmopolitan and international city, where women are reported to have stronger personalities than men who are sought after for their cleaning and cooking talents and emotional tenderness. During the month of April, Poloff conducted numerous interviews with gay individuals living in Shanghai, as well as academics and health professionals, to discuss the gay community in Shanghai. The majority of gay individuals interviewed for this cable find Shanghai an easy place to live, particularly gay men. One gay male volunteer for Chi Heng Foundation, a group that operated a toll-free hotline for callers with questions about being gay, said that he "could not imagine the misery of being gay in the countryside" and relished his anonymity in Shanghai. He advised callers from small towns to move to Shanghai, which he called "China's San Francisco," or, Beijing, a second but lesser option. By contrast, a senior doctor from the International Peace Maternity and Child Health Hospital who was engaged in research on the gay community insisted that Chengdu's environment far surpassed Shanghai due to the quality of gay bars and frequency of "traditional gay performances." He said that Chengdu's sophisticated gay entertainment was not due to the city's distance from Beijing, but because a high-level official in the Chengdu municipal government was "personally interested" in the gay community's quality of entertainment.

¶3. (SBU) A gay 25 year-old male engineer from Zhejiang and a gay 23 year-old male from Jilin said that it was easy to be

"out" in Shanghai because of the reputation of Shanghai men as being "soft and effeminate." They said that "people don't necessarily think we are gay...just Shanghainese." They both agreed that lesbians had the most freedom in Shanghai because it was generally acceptable for women to hold hands in public. They believed that "butch" or masculine lesbians were especially lucky since most people thought the short hairstyles and tomboy dress were fashion statements celebrating the recent Super Girl TV show winners who dressed in androgynous clothing.

14. (SBU) Contacts noted, however, that Shanghainese attitudes towards gay people were not motivated by openness towards homosexuality, but rather a cultivated ignorance. One lesbian said that her cropped hair, deep voice, and boyish clothing caused confusion amongst some Shanghainese. She noted that customers, taxi drivers and restaurant staff insisted that she was a man despite her protests to the contrary. A thirty-something lesbian said that she did not think the typical Shanghainese was concerned about gay issues or would consider going to an event to learn more about gay people. The gay engineer agreed, stating that Shanghainese people were aware that some people were gay, but "don't think twice about it unless a direct family member is involved." Describing Shanghai people's attitudes towards homosexuality, openly gay Lawyer Zhou Dan quoted the traditional Confucian traditional saying, "feiliwushi, feiliwuting, feiliwuxin, feiliwudong," meaning people see something "uncivil" but don't state it or take action, to describe Shanghai people's attitudes about homosexuality. For example, after Zhou recently appeared on a Phoenix TV show about gay issues, family friends, who were previously unaware that Zhou was gay, approached his parents and simply said "we saw your son on television." Nothing further was discussed about the show or Zhou, but he said this was a very Chinese way of making something hidden known but allowing

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it to remain unspoken.

ANONYMITY MAKES GOOD NEIGHBORS

15. (SBU) Due to the low level of awareness about homosexuality in Shanghai, most gay couples' had few problems in renting apartments or living together. The gay engineer from Zhejiang explained that it was to their advantage that "young people in Shanghai don't talk to their neighbors," adding that only people "over 50 who lived in a small neighborhood for over ten years" spoke to each other. He rarely saw his neighbors and suspected that even if his neighbors were aware that he was gay, they would not speak out. Another trend many identified was between sets of older gay male and lesbian couples. In this scenario, two same-sex male and female couples purchased two apartments in the same building. The couples could then quickly switch to opposite sex couples for events with relatives, giving the appearance of a traditional family.

ACADEMIA: THE STRAIGHT AND NARROW

16. (SBU) Academic institutions in Shanghai have begun to pay more attention to the gay community, primarily in relation to health issues. Prestigious Fudan University offers two classes on gay issues: "Homosexual Health" at the School of Public Health, taught by Professor Gao Yanning, and "Gay Studies" at the Department of Sociology, taught by Professor Sun Zhongxin. In a meeting with Poloff on April 17, Dr. Gao said he began his class in 2003 with only one registered student. In the following years, only four students on average registered per semester. However, Dr. Gao said that the class was typically filled with 90-100 unofficial students, drawn by the day's topic or a guest lecturer. He suspected that they preferred not to have the course on their official transcripts.

17. (SBU) Despite several course offerings on gay studies and an increase in graduate research on the gay community, university students faced pressure to be perceived as "normal." Shanghai

Academy of Social Sciences (SASS) Research Center for HIV/AIDS Public Policy Director Xia Guomei cautioned that just because students took these classes did not mean that they accepted the gay community. Zhou Dan also noted that there was pressure for "top students" to appear straight out of fear of being excluded from scholarships or entry into advanced studies. He said while he recognized that he was gay at an early age, he stayed closeted at university because he was worried about how his professors would treat him and was concerned that they would not provide him with future recommendations. One gay male said that being a top student gave him freedom to explore his sexuality: "my grades gave me flexibility or a buffer zone to do what I wanted." He noted that "teachers in China don't know much about this area or how to deal with it, so they pretend that it doesn't exist."

¶18. (SBU) There are few gay or lesbian student organizations in Shanghai. According to Dr. Gao, there was only one gay-related student organization at Fudan University, which called itself Knowledge Peace Group (Zhi Heshi). It was established in 2005 for the purpose of researching the gay community in relation to health issues. Gao served as the group's supervisor. The group was composed of around 30 members with both gay and straight students. During Poloff's discussion with the group's founder, he indicated that the group was more of a social group but had initiated Fudan's first performance of the Eve Ensler's Vagina Monologues in 2004.

#### WORKPLACE: KEEPING A LOW PROFILE

¶19. (SBU) Despite Shanghai's booming economy and multitude of multinational companies, gay individuals appear to be accepted, or even present, only within a narrow scope of professions. Many gay individuals spoke of occasional unwelcome attention from co-workers trying to find them spouses. One man said,

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"People think we live a miserable life in solitude," and found that his single status was cause for great concern at the office. One woman said that it was impossible to get promotions since a woman in her mid-thirties who was unmarried and was clearly "normal." The 25 year-old engineer from Zhejiang expressed with some dismay that he might be "the only gay engineer in Shanghai." Wearing a tight tank top and a diamond hoop, he explained that he dressed very differently at work and was not out to co-workers. He did not believe that anyone at his large engineering firm was aware that he was gay, and he was not aware of any other gay colleagues.

¶10. (SBU) A lesbian working in the wine industry had told all of her local friends that she was gay but preferred not to tell her co-workers because "Shanghainese liked to gossip." And while the engineer felt isolated at his firm, another gay male was relatively comfortable being out with his colleagues because "there are many gay people in public relations and advertising." Besides, many gay Shanghainese did not use their sexuality as a primary identifier. One man said, "unlike Americans, Chinese people are not identity obsessed."

¶11. (SBU) A lesbian sporting a mowhawk said that she had very long hair when she was hired by a local PR firm. Once her look changed, the firm's HR director spoke to her about the need "to wear high heels and not to dress like a boy." She has since come out to some straight colleagues but has always worried about their reaction. She also changed positions and now worked for a foreign company, where many of the employees were gay. Her work contract impressed her most because it contained a paragraph on the company's policy not to discriminate based on sexuality. However, even at her new position, she still worried about making straight employees "feel uncomfortable."

¶12. (SBU) According to a 24-year old gay male from Chongqing, and graduate of Fudan University, most foreign firms were more gay-friendly than Chinese firms. He was not out at his previous employer, GE, but decided to be out to certain employees at his

new firm, McKinsey Consulting, after discovering that one of the partners was Chinese and openly gay. He joined Gays and Lesbians at McKinsey (GLAM), which held conferences around the world for all gay employees. He said there were only three members at the Shanghai branch, but noted that there could be more. Apparently, the Asian branches of GLAM were always very small in comparison to the North American and European branches.

¶13. (SBU) Many gay individuals said that they suspected their co-workers were aware of their sexuality but preferred not to openly acknowledge nontraditional behavior. A local gay man said the fine line of tolerance was "actually stating someone was gay." He told a story of a friend who worked in a three-star hotel and was fired after his boyfriend announced their relationships to other employees. His boss dismissed him by saying that too many people knew about him and that he had disgraced the company.

#### FAMILY OUTLOOK/PRESSURES

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¶14. (SBU) Beneath Shanghai's modern veneer, traditional values run deep. The social pressure to conform stems from the family unit, with many gay individuals bowing to family pressure to marry and produce children. Almost all gay individuals interviewed remain closeted to their parents and related stories about gay people who revealed their sexuality only to have their parents try to "cure them." One gay male remained closeted because his mother "constantly told me that all gay people have HIV/AIDS and other diseases." One lesbian explained that the Asian cultural pressure to continue the family bloodline was the biggest barrier to full disclosure. She said "adoption was not even acceptable in Chinese families since blood was not passed to a new generation." She spoke with some sadness about China's new adoption law, explaining that the ban on single parents could mean she would have to enter a convenience marriage, a gay man wedded to a gay woman, to adopt in the future. However, she and her girlfriend had shared the same room at her parents' home

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multiple times, and her parents always welcomed visits from her girlfriend who they referred to as her "good friend"

¶15. (SBU) Some parents suspected their children's sexuality but preferred it remain unknown. One 35-year old gay male from Chengdu described coming out to his parents as a guilt-inducing process that felt like "shaking off a burden and placing it on them because they now had to decide how to tell their friends." He added that after he came out, his parents still tried to set him up with a girl. To his surprise, his father eventually gave him permission to marry a lesbian as an option "to save face in their social network." Zhou Dan said the problem of fake marriages, where one spouse was unaware of the other's homosexuality, was the number one issue facing the gay community in China. Zhou blamed the traditional Chinese outlook on family for the pervasiveness of this problem. According to Zhou, homosexual men in fake marriages treated their sexual relations with men as a hobby and continued to have heterosexual relationships, and even children, to please their parents.

#### WHERE HAVE ALL THE LESBIANS GONE?

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¶16. (SBU) Another factor impacting the gay community in Shanghai was the gender component at play within the gay community. In Shanghai, women's and men's lives were quite different due to the gender inequalities in China at large. Convenience marriages and conventional marriages, for example, mean very different things to lesbians or gays. One researcher noted that gay men may have had the stigma of HIV/AIDS to counter in society but that "gay women have no identity at all, which may be even worse." One gay individual counted at least 11 gay venues in Shanghai, mainly catering to gay men. A graduate student researching gay websites identified 100 websites devoted to the gay male community, but only 5.4 percent geared towards lesbians. The owner of a gay nightclub said that

"when someone comments on the gay community in Shanghai, the only image that comes to mind is a bunch of men." Shanghai Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/shanghai-lgbt/> was the first online effort to unite the gay community and draw out Shanghai's seemingly hidden lesbians. One gay male explained that it was typical in Shanghai for gay men to congregate and organize social events, but lesbians remained barely visible, preferring to keep to themselves.

¶17. (SBU) One woman pointed to the creation of "Les in Shanghai," another Yahoo group, which screened potential members to ensure only gay females were permitted, as an example of the divide. Shanghai LGBT was started in December 2006 in response to "Les in Shanghai" denying membership to a straight female. One of the LGBT founders said that the "Les in Shanghai" members believed that straight applicants aimed to publicly "out" them. Zhou Dan said lesbians distrusted the gay community because of previous approaches by gay men with offers to enter fake marriages. For women, family pressure forced women into marrying, preferably before the age of 30. A senior doctor at the International Peace Maternity and Child Health Hospital pointed out that "if men don't get married, there are many excuses ... they don't have a house, a high salary or a good job ... but for women there is only one excuse or they have a disease." In fact, he stated "women have zero reasons not to be married."

¶18. (SBU) Some believed that the lack of visible lesbians or lesbian venues might be due to a general trend in Shanghai of women making lower salaries than men. One lesbian said that gay bars for women did not stay in business long since most lesbians in Shanghai were only "out" for a short period of time. She explained that many lesbians only "come out" during college when they still lived with their parents and had minimal disposable cash. After graduation, many lesbians entered fake marriages and disappeared from the scene.

¶19. (SBU) Gay men in Shanghai tended to have stronger economic pull, and many stores and clubs had caught on and now vied for

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their patronage. One gay Shanghai native said that "gay men were first publicized by HIV/AIDS and now everyone wants our money." The gay McKinsey employee noted that beggars and taxi drivers were all aware of the gay income power and stationed themselves outside of nightclubs like "Pink Home." He said that "a lot of beggars focus on the gay scene because they know that gay men don't have a family burden, and many are rich."

COMMENT

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¶20. (SBU) The personal concerns of gay individuals in Shanghai about what to tell family and coworkers remain similar to those around the world. The tolerant Shanghai population - perhaps influenced by Shanghai's long-standing view of itself as an international city with sophisticated, urbane people - leads to fewer actual social clashes or problems than might be expected in the face of thousands of years of traditional Chinese values. However, this lack of obvious social clashes continues to mean that legal issues related to the gay community, such as those emerging in other countries, have not yet become major social issues. There has yet to be a "Stonewall" in Shanghai or a single moment of public controversy to push gay rights or issues to the forefront of public debate. Furthermore, it seems that the Shanghai government, as with many topics, is content not to suppress or encourage public thinking about gay issues.

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